

Pharaoh Ramses II

By Vickie Chao

Ramses II, most experts agree, was one of the greatest rulers in ancient Egypt. As the third pharaoh of the 19th dynasty, he inherited an Egypt whose authority in the region had been seriously undermined by the upstart of the Hittite Empire. Hoping to reclaim the lost Egyptian pride as well as territory, Ramses II launched a series of military campaigns. While the results were somewhat mixed on that front, he did, however, manage to make his kingdom more prosperous than ever. Apart from his political achievements, Ramses II might very well be, according to a tale in the Old Testament, the pharaoh who first granted Moses and his people their freedom, but later recanted the decision. Although the validity of this latter claim is still an open debate, it certainly makes Ramses II a very intriguing figure in history. Therefore, we should know more about the man and his works.

Ramses II was the second child of Pharaoh Seti I and his queen Tuya. He ascended the throne around 1279 B.C. and held on to the power for the next 66 years. During his long reign (surpassed only by Pepi II of the 6th dynasty who ruled Egypt for possibly 94 years), he married many wives and begot at least 100 children. Sure, as far as his personal life was concerned, Ramses II seemed to have a very interesting one indeed. But that, however, wasn't what made him famous in the first place.



When Ramses II became king in his early twenties, he showed a strong interest in taking back Syria. To do that, he had to find a way to crush the Hittites and send them packing. Four years into his reign, he decided to try his hand and prepared his troops for the big showdown. Prior to arriving in the city of Kadesh (or Qadesh, located on the Orontes River in present-day western Syria), the young pharaoh divided his army into four corps - the Amun, Ra, Ptah, and Setekh. With him personally leading the brigade of Amun, he instructed the brigade of Ra to follow his trail and sent the other two to approach Kadesh from a different direction. He had no idea then that the Hittite army had already reached Kadesh and were waiting patiently for him to walk into their well-laid trap.

Ramses II eventually learned of the truth from the spies he caught, but it was too late by then. When the ambush began, the brigades of Amun and Ra fell apart and fled, abandoning their pharaoh. Ramses II and his bodyguards fought bravely against the Hittites and were able to escape to safety. After reuniting with the remaining Egyptian troops (the brigades of Ptah and Setekh), Ramses II returned to the battlefield once again. This time around, he was able to turn the table against his archenemy. Several days later, King Muwatallis (or Muwatallish) of the Hittite Empire asked for a cease-fire and got it. In the end, neither side could really claim an all-out victory. Though it was true that Ramses II defeated Muwasallis rather soundly on the warfront, he did not secure Syria for Egypt as he had set out to do originally. Meanwhile, the reverse could also be said about Muwasallis: he failed to build upon his initial victory and eventually suffered a humiliating loss; nonetheless, he did not lose Syria.

After this famous Battle of Kadesh, Ramses II tried for several more times to take down the Hittite Empire to no avail. Realizing that the ongoing conflicts would only benefit the two countries' other enemies, he and Hattusili III (the new Hittite king) held a peace talk around 1258 B.C. As both sides came for the negotiation, they agreed that they should not invade each other's territory. That is, Ramses II had to relinquish his claim on Syria once and for all. In addition, they also recognized the urgency to form an alliance so they could come to each other's aid when needed. To avoid future disputes, they made clear that they would return refugees or criminals back to the country where they had come from. By not harboring them, the final document - containing a total of 18 articles - is long thought to be the world's first known peace treaty and extradition agreement. Issued in two copies and two languages (hieroglyphs for Egypt and Akkadian for the Hittite Empire), the main text on both are more or less the same. Yet, there was one striking difference between the two versions pertaining to who had initiated the talk in the first place. The Egyptian copy said that it was Hattusili III who wanted to end the conflicts, but the Hittite copy claimed that it was really Ramses II who extended the olive branch.

No matter who started the talk, the fact remains: Ramses II and Hattusili III both honored the agreement and never

went into war again. But given their past skirmish, the tension between the two certainly did not disappear overnight. For one, Ramses II refused to turn over Mursili III, the Hittite king deposed by Hattusili III around 1265 B.C. even though the treaty carried a specific clause for extradition. Upon losing his throne, Mursili III fled to Egypt and sought asylum there. Perhaps on the grounds that this event had taken place before the agreement was signed, Ramses II ignored the repeated requests from Hattusili III, claiming that he did not know the whereabouts of Mursili III. Though frustrated, the Hittite king held back and did not resort to violence. Slowly, the relationship between the two superpowers improved. And it got even better after Ramses II married a daughter of Hattusili III. Their royal wedding was depicted in Abu Simbel, one of the many monuments built by Ramses II during his reign.

Abu Simbel is a set of twin temples carved out of a mountainside. Located near Aswan, the greater temple was dedicated to three Egyptian deities (Amun-Ra, Ptah, and Ra-Horakhty) plus Ramses II himself, whereas the smaller temple was for the goddess Hathor and pharaoh's favorite wife, Nefertari. Because the complex is situated in southern Egypt, far from other major cities, it never really received a lot of attention. As time went by, it was completely forgotten and covered by sand for nearly 3,000 years. Then in 1813, a Swiss traveler by the name of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt spotted it by chance. Four years later, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, an explorer from Italy, found the entrance door and became the first person to visit Abu Simbel after more than three millennia! During the 1960s, a great effort was undertaken to move the entire monument to a new location - about 210 feet higher and 650 feet back from the Nile River - as the Egyptian government prepared to construct the Aswan High Dam. Fearing that the rising water level might destroy the landmark, archaeologists and scientists cut Abu Simbel into large blocks. Bit by bit, they dismantled and reassembled the whole thing at its new spot. Today, Abu Simbel is one of the must-see sights in Egypt. Together with the other buildings constructed by Ramses II (such as Ramesseum), their magnificence is a vivid reminder and perfect showcase of how powerful the pharaoh was all those years ago. Given his achievements, no wonder we also call him Ramses the Great and hail him as one of the best rulers in ancient Egypt!

Pharaoh Ramses II

Questions

- _____ 1. What dynasty was Ramses II from?
- A. 19th dynasty
 - B. 13th dynasty
 - C. 6th dynasty
 - D. 21st dynasty
- _____ 2. Which of the following about Ramses II is correct?
- A. He gained control of Syria after the Battle of Kadesh.
 - B. His reign was the longest in ancient Egypt.
 - C. He and Hattusili III signed the world's first known peace treaty.
 - D. He died during the Battle of Kadesh.
- _____ 3. Which pharaoh ruled Egypt the longest?
- A. Seti I
 - B. King Tut
 - C. Pepi II
 - D. Ramses II
- _____ 4. Which of the following about Abu Simbel is correct?
- A. Abu Simbel was re-discovered in the 1960s during the construction of the Aswan High Dam.
 - B. Abu Simbel is situated in northern Egypt.
 - C. Giovanni Battista Belzoni was the first person to enter Abu Simbel after nearly 3,000 years.
 - D. Abu Simbel has two temples, both built in marble.

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 5. Who did Ramses II refuse to extradite back to the Hittite Empire?
- A. Hattusili III
 - B. Mursili III
 - C. Seti I
 - D. Muwatallis
- _____ 6. Which of the following about the Battle of Kadesh is NOT true?
- A. It was a fight over the control of Syria.
 - B. King Muwasallis of the Hittite Empire had an upper hand in the beginning, but lost the battle in the end.
 - C. It was a showdown between Egypt and the Hittite Empire.
 - D. Ramses II personally led two brigades, Amun and Ra, and crushed the Hittite army Kadesh.
- _____ 7. Which of the following statements about the peace treaty signed by both Egypt and the Hittite Empire is correct?
- A. The peace treaty carried specific clauses for extradition.
 - B. Both sides confirmed that it was Ramses II who initiated the peace talk.
 - C. Both sides agreed that it was Muwasallis who wanted to end the conflicts.
 - D. The treaty was written in two languages - hieroglyphs for Egypt and Arabic for the Hittite Empire.
- _____ 8. Who was the first one to re-discover Abu Simbel?
- A. Johann Ludwig Burckhardt
 - B. Christopher Columbus
 - C. Giovanni Battista Belzoni
 - D. James Cook

Suppose you were Ramses II. You want to prepare a speech to convince your people why it would benefit them if you signed a treaty with the Hittite Empire. Draft the speech.



Date _____

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